

The Curious Case of the Croydon Cat-Killer:

Producing Predators in the Multi-Species Metropolis

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Abstract

From September 2015, the deaths of hundreds of pet cats in Croydon, London and the UK have been attributed to the actions of one or more killers, mutilating and dismembering animals and leaving their body parts as calling cards. In September 2018, the police operation to catch the ‘Croydon cat killer’ was called off, with the deaths attributed to the actions of motor cars and foxes. This paper argues that the case is more than a mere ‘moral panic’. We are interested instead in what the case of the ‘Croydon cat-killer’ says about our relations with other animals in the city, and in the wider biopolitical question of why we accept some animal deaths as normal ‘predation’, whilst others are considered wholly unnatural forms of violence. Specifically, we explore the *logic*, *optics*, and *politics* of ‘predation’ in the media representations of these animal deaths, meaning the analytical premises, the framing devices that make these narratives visible, and the broader political positions taken by protagonists in these debates. We argue that the narratives of predation produced in this case have important implications for how we live with other animals in our shared cities. The role of the media in promulgating these narratives of predation is central to what we term ‘fabulous ecologies’: we speculate that nonhuman animals inhabit a cultural as well as a physical environment. Narratives of animal killers and animal victims make the multi-species metropolis more, or less, viable to our nonhuman animal neighbours.

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1. Introduction



Figure 1. The Croydon Ri-purr. *The Sun*, 11 December 2015. With permission from *The Sun/News Licensing*.

The Croydon cat-killer's reign of terror lasted from September 2015, the date of the first feline 'murder', in Addiscombe in the Borough of Croydon, South London, to September 2018, when the culprit responsible for hundreds of mutilated pets was revealed by the Metropolitan Police to be not a single killer but the thousands of urban foxes who have made London their home in the last few decades (Baynes, 2018). To be accurate, the Metropolitan Police identified road traffic accidents as the immediate cause of death, with foxes blamed only for the subsequent mutilations (Davenport, 2018, Horton, 2018, Sullivan, 2018). Media

headlines that had focused for three years on the actions of a serial killer of animals, possibly abetted by copy-cats in London and elsewhere, shifted abruptly to the absurdity of a three-year police investigation that had cost perhaps £500,000, whilst the automobiles that killed the cats and the foxes that dismembered them were all the time hiding in plain sight.

Many concerned animal lovers still believe a perpetrator is at large, but the Croydon cat-killer has already been tagged as a salutary case of moral panic (Novella, 2018; for a comparable case, see Bulc, 2002). This paper, which follows hard on the heels of the end of final police statement, is not intended to question its findings, nor to make a case for reopening the enquiry. Nor are we concerned to blame the media and the public for their reactions. We focus on the case of the Croydon cat-killer rather to ask what lessons we can learn about the urban animals who live with us. What do the killings of and by animals say about our understanding of what is normal and natural in our cities? When does ‘predation’, by which we usually mean the preying of one animal on others, lose its natural-ness, and become something more sinister and unacceptable?

Predation is the principal focus of this paper, precisely because it has more than one meaning. The dominant definition, the hunting, killing, and consumption of another species, contrasts with a minor one, the infliction of injury on others. We typically see the first as involving animals, whilst the latter, looser, sense concerns humans. Yet predation and depredation are not so easily distinguished. We advance the argument that predators are actively constructed, a product of animal-human interactions, and of biopolitical negotiation. If life presents a border to politics, as Lemke’s gloss on Foucault has it, ‘a border that should be simultaneously respected and overcome, one that seems to be both natural and given but also artificial and transformable’ (Lemke, 2011, pp. 4-5), then what we name as predation is

dependent on a biopolitical calculus of which animals' lives and deaths count as natural. This boundary is all the more blurred where the boundary-challenging creatures we call pets are concerned. When pets die at the hands of human killers, or else in the 'peculiar relationalities entailed in roadkill' (Michael, 2004, p. 280), subsequently mutilated, we witness a confusion of the seemingly categorical language of predation. This confusion, explored in the case of the Croydon cat-killer, forms the central matter of this paper.

We speculate further, however, on the environment in which this politics is produced and played out, proposing that biopolitics consider the significance of popular representations of nonhuman animals. 'To erase the so-called artifice – humans and our constructions – is to deny our presence in the natural world', argues Gregg Mitman (1999, p. 208) in his analysis of American wildlife film, and we similarly put forward the media as playing a critical role in the fortunes of animal lives. We depart from conventional analyses of moral panics to suggest that the *stories* we tell about other species are active *agencies* in urban ecology, agency here meaning actions or interventions producing particular effects. We would use the term 'media ecology' if it was not already taken, so we proffer the phrase 'fabulous ecologies' instead. We consider that nonhuman animals inhabit a cultural as well as a physical *umwelt*, and that mediated narratives of predation have biopolitical implications for our nonhuman neighbours. The role of the tabloid press is far from negligible in such an ecology. Angela Cassidy and Brett Mills have noted 'a lack of focus on media and communications as a specific site of construction of [animal-human] relationships' (Cassidy & Mills, 2012, p. 506), and we attempt to address this neglect here. We proceed by considering three narratives of 'predation' emerging from the spate of media coverage generated by the fears of a cat-killer operating in London and further afield. Using Factiva to construct a working database of UK print and online media articles (14 by the end of 2015, 260 in 2016, 299 in 2017, and 504 in

2018), supplementing this with English-language non-UK media coverage and social media when appropriate, we explore in turn the *logic*, *optics*, and *politics* of predation in media representations of the 2015-18 cat killings. By ‘logic’ we mean the analytical premises, and by ‘optics’ the framing devices that make these narratives of predation visible; these lead into the broader political positions taken by the protagonists in these debates. We return, in conclusion, to our more speculative argument for understanding the ecology of stories in which the lives and deaths of urban animals are played out.

2. The Logic of Predation

Let us start with the logic of predation. Michael Wise (2016) forwards this concept to argue that cattle ranchers and conservationists in the Montana-Alberta borderlands drew a distinction between productive agriculture and the predation of stock by wolves and by indigenous hunters. Wise demonstrates that a logic of predation *animalizes* hunting behaviours, whilst other forms of animal death (such as industrial slaughter) are seen by contrast as normal, the very opposite of predatory animality. At the risk of bathos, we shift our attention from the open plains of the North American ranching frontier to the streets and gardens of the British suburbs, but we press the point that predators are made rather than born. It is worth stressing that whilst the terminology of predation is not used in media reports of the Croydon cat-killer, save to indict nonhuman animals, the language employed for the putative criminal is clearly dependent on that used for ‘serial predators’ (Godwin, 1999; Guihaire, 2017; Haggerty, 2009). So, in no particular order, we have terms such as ‘cat ripper’, ‘serial cat killer’, ‘serial killer of pets’, ‘psycho’, ‘psychopath’, ‘pet butcher’, ‘serial slayer’, ‘twisted killer’, and so on. People can become predators, illegitimate and animalized killers, too.

In the Croydon case, belief in a human perpetrator is premised on the notion that the injuries suffered by the feline victims could not have been produced by accident: these injuries involved decapitations, amputation, severed heads. If we accept this premise, then these deaths are the work of one or more sadists. This takes us inevitably into the questions of premeditation and psychology, for such a killer must stalk the neighbourhoods prepared to kill and to dismember, before leaving the results of his work as a taunting trophy. The presumption is indeed that this is the work of a *man*, and a precise description of the suspected killer was circulated by a local animal welfare organization, South Norwood Animal Rescue Liberty (SNARL). SNARL took the lead in pressing for a police investigation, and passed on this description: ‘a white man in his 40s with short brown hair, dressed in dark clothing, possibly with acne scarring to his face’ (Siddique, 2017). The suspect was most likely to be seen wearing a headlamp or carrying a torch, since his victims were taken at night; most ominously, he would likely be carrying one or more knives. And there might be more than one killer: one of the co-founders of SNARL argued:

We can’t rule out that we have two people working very closely together. From a psychological point of view, serial killers often work in twos. “One of the interesting things about duos is they actually need two personality types. One is dominant and one is submissive – but both will be interested in sadism. They start killing together.

Normally the main aggressor, the dominant one, is caught and then the other one won’t offend again”. (Murray, 2018)

Of the motives and psychology of such a cat-killer there has been much speculation. Vince Egan, Associate Professor of Forensic Psychology at Nottingham University, noted that ‘In some individuals, we have seen animal cruelty as part of a broader pattern in which humans

are also harmed’, but cautioned that ‘It is far more likely that this reflects a rather more banal pattern of anti-social behaviour, such as drunkenness or something that doesn’t go further’ (*The Week*, 2018). Other experts were much less hesitant. Adam Lynes, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Birmingham City University, speculated on the background of the killer: ‘the individual responsible is likely male; maintains a low-skilled job that allows for greater geographical movement; organized (forensically aware, for example); and, that they are likely narcissistic (in that they are following all the updates both in traditional media and newer media such as Twitter)’ (Lynes, 2017). Related lines of enquiry aired the possibility that the cat killings were driven by a hatred of women. Detective Andy Collin, leading the police investigation, reasoned that ‘Cats are targeted because they are associated with the feminine. The killer can’t deal with a woman or women who are troubling him’ (*The Week*, 2018). In a BBC documentary on the killings, a behavioural analyst at the National Crime Agency even warned that the killer’s sexual fantasies posed a risk to human life (Usborne, 2018). Newspapers informed their readers that ‘serial killers like Ian Brady, Ted Bundy and the Boston Strangler all started off on their path to murder by gratuitously killing animals’ (Sullivan, 2017).

These ideas follow the standard profiling of murderers, but Lynes also speculated, using Robert Darnton’s (1984) landmark essay on the artisan culture of early eighteenth-century Paris, that cat mutilations and killings might well be the expression of social and political *ressentiment* against privileged pet owners:

could the ‘Croydon cat ripper[s]’ be targeting and mutilating these cats as a means to gain the attention of others that they in some way perceive as a source of their own frustrations and discontents? If we consider that this person may hold a low paid

and/or skilled job and that they appear to mainly target cats from homes in the 'suburbia' (as noted in many mainstream media outlets), then they may well be attacking the seemingly idyllic, family-oriented and economically stable status and values that such a person may hold in contempt. If we were to consider how these pets are being mutilated and left in locations where they are likely to be found by their owners, then this admittedly outlandish possibility does not seem so strange after all. Returning to the concept of political economy touched upon in the last paragraph, the rise of neo-liberal ideals and the growth between the rich and the poor in the last few decades provides further theoretical weight to this potential train of thought. (Lynes, 2017)

That the Croydon killings represent might be traced to the specific economic, social, and political conditions of the neoliberal present is quite a leap, and it is an example of how quickly the logic of a human predator of pets might escalate (see Jones, 2016). Some of these ideas seem, in hindsight, imaginative bordering on the credulous. In fairness, however, we should note that the theory that a human killer was/is responsible is not outrageous. There have been many recorded incidents of cat killings – not just the work of isolated cat haters (or bird lovers), or of apprentices working out their grievances, but also that of seemingly deranged individuals whose sadism is visited on the bodies of animals, cats in particular. In 1937, for instance, a reward was offered by the RSPCA to catch 'a person - believed to be a maniac', responsible for strangling a number of cats and hanging them on railings in Fulham, London (*Times*, 1937, February 6, p. 9; *Observer*, 1937, February 7, p. 22). In 1956, Teddy Boys were blamed for the mutilation and killing of a number of cats in Liverpool (*Guardian*, 1956, July 16, p. 8). In 1995, a reward was offered to catch a cat killer in Newark, with the police fearing that they had been sacrificed in some Satanic ritual (*Daily Express*, 1995,

February 4, p. 7). In the same year, 24 cats in a Northumberland village were feared victims of a cat killer (*Daily Express*, 1995, September 22, p. 15). In 2010, five cats were poisoned with antifreeze in Lancashire (*Daily Express*, 2010, June 23, p. 30). We might be skeptical about certain lines of enquiry, but it is perfectly plausible that the routine abuse of nonhuman animals extends to occasional spree killings, and there are ongoing investigations of serial cat killings in other parts of the world (Kaplan, 2017, Tsang, Mervosh, & Gomez, 2018).

The logic of predation also means the narrative fixing of the figure of a ‘predator’. As we have noted, this is a word that is typically applied to classic serial killers (and also paedophiles and other sexual assailants), and the language of a ‘cat ripper’ is an obvious nod in this direction, save that pets take their place as victims. If ‘Jack the Ripper’ names a moral panic about ‘sexual predators’ (Walkowitz, 1992), the Croydon cat-killer triggers associations of vicious, unbridled, ‘animal’ cruelty to our closest animal companions. If the place of pets is by our side, perhaps to soothe our own anxieties, then the callous culling of companion animals can only call up the greatest disgust, unease, terror. Pet-keeping generates its own fears (Fox, 2006; Howell, 2015), but the spectre of the Croydon cat-killer might be its most profound manifestation. Such anxieties perhaps devolve from the guilty conscience of the meat-eating pet owner, since most of us ‘predate’ animals by eating them, or by feeding them to our companion animals. But there is surely a stronger case for thinking of the cat-killer as a crossing of the proper boundary between humans and animals, for if pets are honorary humans, a pet killer might be felt to forfeit his own humanity. The fact that this violence is inflicted upon defenceless pets seems to emphasize the truth of the ancient dictum – revived by Freud – that man is wolf to man:

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend

themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.

Homo homini lupus (Freud, 1985, pp. 68-69).

Freud and the ancients might well be unfair to the wolf, but the point is clear enough. This identification of humans with predatory instincts, however warped, overlaps with the definition of predator that we inherit from natural science, bringing ‘man’ down to the level of the most vicious ‘animal’. In the media framing of serial killing, the *mingling* of the natural and the cultural is tenuous to the point of illegitimacy, and ‘predator’ comparisons are not to be used lightly. Predation is, strictly, that special form of symbiosis between two different *species*, *predator* and *prey*, and it is extremely complex, with the predatory role of human beings particularly contentious (Daramont, Fox, Bryan, & Reimchen, 2015).

Moreover, when we loosely identify human beings as ‘predators’ we typically describe the perversity of the *abnormal*; it is the very unnaturalness of these killings that is at stake. But in the same breath the language and the logic of predation is used to naturalize and normalize – as for instance in defence of meat production and consumption (Stibbe, 2001). So predation is rendered normal or unnatural depending on context: animal ‘predators’ are named both in order to normalize their actions, as animalized behaviour, and to justify their killing by human beings; conversely, human ‘predators’ are abnormal and unnatural even when they are seen as acting on their ‘animal’ instincts. The figure of the Croydon cat-killer reinforces the

norms of animal-human interaction as much as he appears to challenge our understanding of normal human behaviour towards animals.

3. The Optics of Predation

We turn now to the ways in which this logic of predation is rendered *visible*. Optics has become a commonplace term where the media framing of stories is concerned, targeting the strategic diffusing of information to the wider public, the shaping of representations of an issue, the guiding or finessing of dialogue. But we go somewhat further by borrowing from Claire-Jean Kim's (2015) sense of the inability of groups with competing interests to *see past* their strong commitments to understand or empathize with the arguments of others, particularly where animal politics is concerned. We build on this essentially agonistic conception in our analysis of the media representations of the Croydon cat-killer, but we do so by taking the framing of sight quite literally, looking at the *mapping* of the presumptive killer's predatory career. Mapping the 'murders' of pets makes the notion of a human predator not only plausible but, in a stronger sense, *possible*. In the case of the Croydon cat-killer, vernacular 'crime maps' accomplish the aims of forensic geography (Worf & Waddell, 2002, p. 341), even where nonhuman animals are the putative victims.

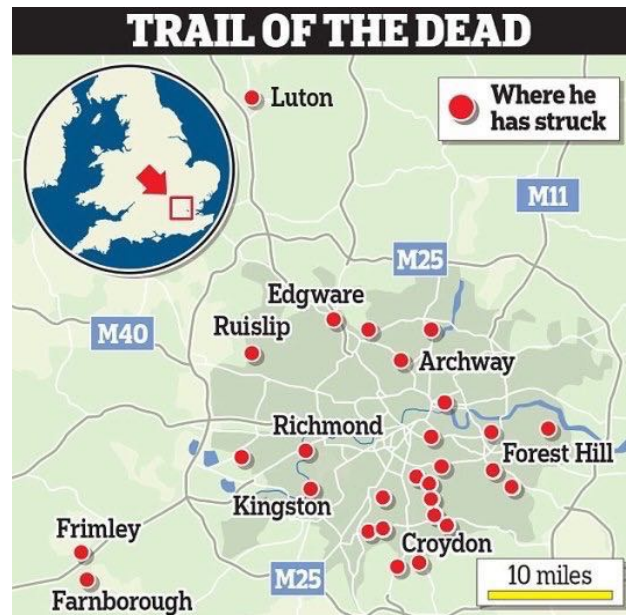


Figure 2. Croydon cat killer's '150 victims across the country'. *Daily Mail*, 24 April 2016.

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holder.

The immediate spark in reporting on the Croydon cat killer occurred in the early months of 2016, around the time the presumed victim body count had reached 100; tabloid crime maps were very quickly produced to narrate the news visually. Several of these maps were circulating through the news media outlets as early as April 2016. They trace 'the trail of the dead' by marking locations of cat corpses (e.g. Martin, 2016), and the killer's seemingly inexorably expanding *range* (e.g. Mullin, 2017): the culprit quickly morphed from the 'Croydon cat killer' or ripper, to the 'M25 cat killer', all the way up to the 'UK cat killer' (Protect Cats UK, 2018) or *#UKAnimalKiller* (justified by the fact that guinea pigs, rabbits, and even foxes have been caught up in these supposed killings and mutilations). Attacks against cats, all presumed to be related, were recorded as far afield as Manchester, Birmingham, Brighton, and the Isle of Wight, and dutifully represented in the successive media graphics.



Figure 3. Recent cases across the UK linked to the UK cat killer. Protect Cats UK, twitter 21 February 2018. Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holder.

These maps need little glossing, but we can focus on one. The charity Protect Cats UK provided a link on their twitter feed to a video timeline plotting the cat killings from September 2015 to November 2017, aiming to illustrate the worryingly expanding range of the killer's work, with the lesson spelled out very clearly: 'As this map shows, linked killings are not just confined to the London area. Pls be vigilant wherever you live in the UK & report anything suspicious. Always keep cats inside at night & be extra vigilant with pets kept outside' (Protect Cats UK, 2018). Again, once the premises of the logic of predation are established, such conclusions follow naturally. The logic of a human predator threads these apparently isolated animal deaths into a pattern of predation, a criminal cartography that offers clues to the mind of a faceless killer. Armed with these maps of crime and criminal mentality, the public are effectively licensed to speculate about the killer's characteristics, whereabouts, and ability to commit these crimes.

If the scene of the crime, the so-called ‘wound landscape’ (Seltzer, 1998), is ‘a map of the interior of the killer’s mind’ (Warwick, 2006, pp. 564, 566), subject and space are collapsed and the serial killer fixed in space, the place of violence becoming inseparable from the person of the killer (Seltzer, 1995, pp. 128, 134). The same optics construct the meaning of a serial killer of pets. There is for instance much speculation about *suburbia* as not just the location of crime but its very *condition* (Seal, 2018, Wiseman, 2018). The optics of predation offers a suturing of person and place that amounts here to something very much like a ‘habitat’. The killer is nature/denatured to a kind of *animal* predator – at the same time that pet victims are humanized. In the graphical presentation of the Croydon cat-killer’s victims, companion animals are honoured with names, pictures, and even brief character sketches (e.g. Mordi, 2017, Quinton, 2015); as with human victims of serial killers, the point is that the dead are *persons* and not just corpses.

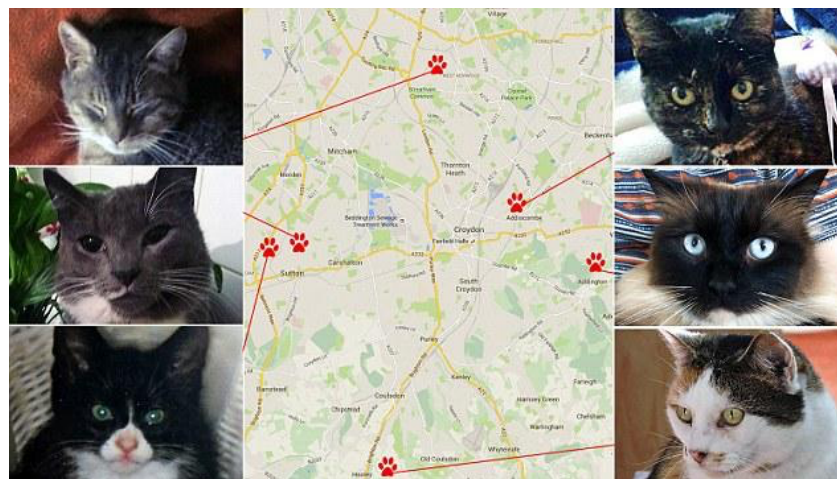


Figure 4. Croydon cat killer: Two more animals found decapitated on Croydon outskirts, . *Sutton & Croydon Guardian*. *Sutton & Croydon Guardian*, 12 April 2017. Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holder.

In most realist narratives, nonhuman animals are ‘minor creatures’, ‘existing in a space at the threshold of representation’, only occasionally becoming ‘characters’ in a human sense (Kreilkamp, 2018, p. 2); but they can as here become something more than ‘mere’ animals. And, since they are victims of an animalized predator, animals and human beings seem to change places, as in the world of fable. Nowhere is this more obvious than in graphics in which the cat killer is described as going on the prowl, around his favourite hunting grounds in London, leaving the spore of a blood-red paw print as he does so (see Tweedie, 2016, Mullin, 2017). Pictured here is a kind of hunting *range*, and this thinking is evident in the words of retired detective chief inspector Mick Neville, whose opinions were canvassed by the newspapers:

There is someone behind one of the doors of these suburban terraced streets hiding a wicked secret. This area seems to be the epicentre of his killing operations. It is where he began and where he still feels at home. The fact he has struck on a Sunday night in the Croydon area also indicates he is local and probably on a day off from work. Jack the Ripper struck at weekends and bank holidays. These roads are quiet, there is very little traffic and no CCTV. It is perfect for him. I believe he has been observing and carefully planning his killings from one of the houses in this area. (Sullivan, 2017)

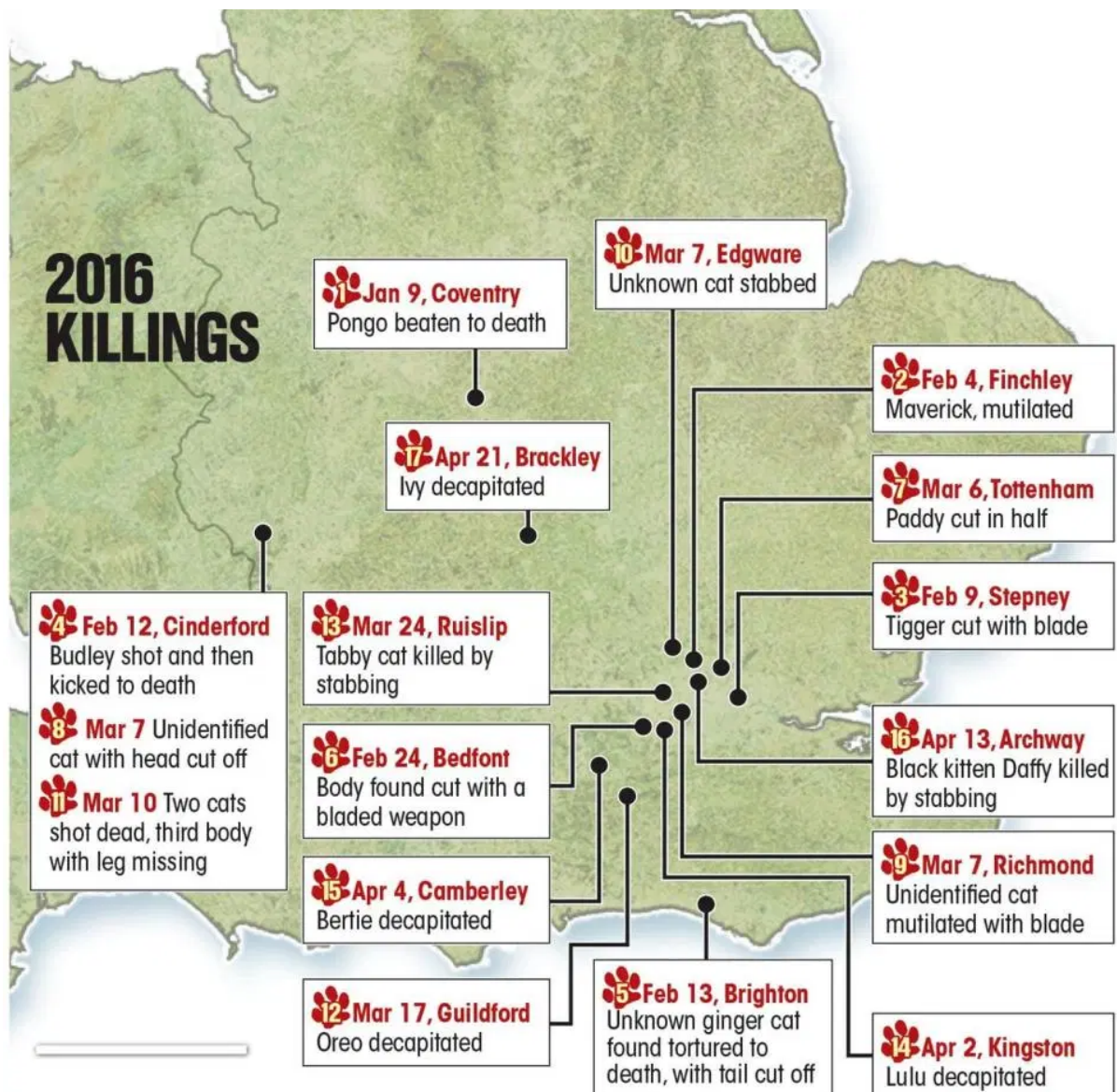


Figure 5. Sick moggie murder: notorious ‘Croydon Cat Killer’ gets ‘kicks’ off owners’ misery as two more pets are found within 24 hours. *The Sun*, 22 January 2017. With permission from *The Sun*/News Licensing.

4. The Politics of Predation

One response might be to question the value placed on these particular killings, which even if true are extremely unusual, whilst the routine abuse of animals is typically obscured. ‘We

need to challenge our belief in the monster', argue criminologists Elizabeth Yardley and David Wilson: 'We must confront the fact that every day, people devalue others. Every day, people harm others. And, more often than not, these people do not look like the monsters of our imagination but are all too often the very stuff of normality' (Yardley & Wilson, 2018). All the same, we should not dismiss the question of *criminal* violence against nonhuman animals, and people's attitudes towards such crimes, which is a remarkably neglected topic (Munro & Munro, 2008, Brooks, 2018, Vollum, Buffington-Vollum, & Longmire, 2004). A focus on rare criminal violence against animals does not have to occlude wider animal abuse, carried out by 'normal' people, people like us. We do not need to challenge our belief in the 'monster' so much as to bring together the monstrous *and* the mundane. In the case at hand, we are confronted with a series of essentially *political* narratives about the normality or abnormality of predation – not just a choice between criminal and ordinary abuse of animals.

The politics of the Croydon cat killer in fact platform two very different kinds of predators. The dispute has become a contest between animal advocacy groups such as SNARL, who maintain that a *human* killer is still on the loose, with the police, their expert witnesses, and a newly sceptical media insisting that the only predators involved are animals – namely, *foxes*. Each is advocating for a different reading of events, different logics, with different optics. At the close of the formal police investigation, no individual culprit was identified and the deaths were deemed a result of car collisions and subsequent fox scavenging. Without wishing to be unduly provocative, we might invoke the infamous informal terminology of the U.S. police: N.H.I. or 'no humans involved' (Wynter, 1994). This is the shorthand used to justify perfunctory investigation of the violent deaths of drug users, sex workers, criminals, and transients, particularly where the poor, the marginal, and nonwhite victims were concerned. By classifying *no human involvement* here, this is of course not meant to diminish

the scandal that ‘N.H.I.’ represents. But we can note that these deaths are also categorized as of lesser or no significance, and thus the criminal connotations of ‘predation’ are abjured. ‘Murders’ become deaths, supposed serial killings become random and unrelated events, a two-step of automobile and fox, traffic collisions and animal scavenging. Apart from mutilated bodies and body parts, there is nothing after all to point to any individual: ‘No CCTV footage, no clothing snagged on a garden fence, or human under a feline claw. No murder weapon’ (Usborne, 2018).

The case of the Croydon cat killer appeared in our earlier discussion to be a story about one human and the pets he may have slaughtered, but this counternarrative, now the authorized version, is also concerned with how we live and should live alongside the other animal inhabitants of the city. It is striking for instance how the *dismissal* of the argument for a human killer reproduces much of the same problematic language and logic of predation in order to make this case. To take only the most obvious example, blame for the killings and mutilations of pet cats is shifted almost wholesale on to another nonhuman actor, the fox. But the identification of foxes as ‘killers’ (even when the argument has it that cars are the immediate lethal instruments, the foxes merely being scavengers), is a distinctive product of a sensationalist news cycle antithetical to nuance or even basic logic. The fox is all too easily portrayed as both an apex predator and one motivated by blind bloodlust, or ‘overkill’, at once a natural predator *and* an ‘illegitimate killer’ (Marvin, 2000). In the city, the fox has been described as an ‘old feline foe’ in a new setting, in the words of Stephen Harris (2018, also see Harris, 2003), retired professor of environmental sciences at the University of Bristol, and a respected expert on fox behaviour drawn upon by the Metropolitan Police. As Harris (2018) explained, ‘We have known for decades that foxes chew the head or tail off carcasses, including dead cats’ (see also Powell, 2018). Harris knows the natural and

unnatural history of foxes as well as anyone, and it is laughable to think of him as some sort of anti-fox spokesperson. Yet the language of ‘foe’ takes the natural history of predator-prey species in an unhelpful direction, replacing a complex and dynamic urban ecology with an ancient antagonism that has more in common with the fables of Aesop than with science. Perhaps inevitably, SNARL and some of its supporters have reacted angrily against the blaming of the fox, which is seen as a convenient distraction from the urgent work of catching a human killer. They have called into question Harris’s involvement with the investigation, or rather the lack of it (SNARL, 2018a). To such partisans, tarnishing the reputation of foxes goes hand in hand with the ongoing failure of police to protect their beloved pets. Essentially, advocates of the cat killer theory see the fox as only a kind of patsy. Some even see the hand of the Establishment at work: as one post to the SNARL Facebook page put it, ‘The media and police will blame foxes as it fits with the agenda of their paymasters at the very top (the elite) to justify fox hunting’ (SNARL, 2018b). Other contributors ‘have suggested that blaming the scavenging animals was a “convenient” way to finally end the three-year-long investigation while justifying senior officers’ enthusiasm for fox hunting’ (Lusher, 2018). These reactions demonstrate a familiar distrust of authority and elites, but also nod to the place of foxes in urban British society, as more or less welcome neighbours (see Marvin, 2000, Woods, 2000). But this status remains parlous. Whilst the U.K. public seem to be either positive or neutral about the growing population of urban foxes, when they are seen to ‘misbehave’ their precarious place in society falls under scrutiny: ‘Negative features of such animals are often exaggerated to reinforce reactions of fear and disgust, which then, in turn, are used to justify human retribution against such “pest” or “vermin” animals’ (Cassidy & Mills, 2012, p. 504). Like other urban animals, foxes presage danger and disorder, further constricting the ‘moral and physical space’ we allow or allot to them (Jerolmack, 2008, p. 73). Blaming the fox for the slaughter of pets (ignoring the

work of cars and other cats) might easily lead to calls for their regulation or eradication. As the case of the Croydon cat-killer rumbles on, we might expect to see more contentious interpretations of foxes and their behaviour. There is the possibility, with an ill-informed public abetted by sensationalist media, that a cat-hating serial killer moral panic might be replaced by what fox partisans have long portrayed as ‘anti-fox hysteria’ (Fox Project, n.d.). Some activists anticipate just such a reaction (Foot, 2018). There is no evidence for any backlash, but as with Cassidy and Mills’ (2012) discussion of the dialogue around a fox attack on two girls in Hackney in 2010, sensationalized media responses lead to the problematization of the fox’s presence in the city. As with the wolf, whose cultural shadow stymies our ability to live alongside another animal (Drenthen, 2015; Emel, 1998), the fox has an enduring reputation that threatens its accommodation in the cities to which these migrants have moved. How can we hope to extend hospitality to these arrivistes (or, after Derrida, *arrivants*: see Naas, 2005) when these animals are so casually portrayed as crazed killers?

Stories about cats as victims of killings have thus become entangled with stories about the fox and the fox’s enemies. These animals have long become placeholders for partisan politics and perhaps even political agents themselves. The same, however, can be said of the cat. The victimization of cats in the news content about the presumptive cat killer evinces a deep allegiance to domesticated companions, with calls for better surveillance and protection of our innocent and vulnerable pets. However, cats are no less confirmed killers than foxes, and possibly more deserving of this title. The same pet cats who are the victims of cars or serial killers are well-known predators themselves. Feral cats (Griffiths, Poulter, & Sibley, 2000) may have a disproportionate impact on wildlife predation than pets, but the animals we cosset are still responsible for millions of bird deaths every year, and indeed for their torture and

mutilation too. The RSPB estimates that pet cats kill 55 million birds (and 225 million other prey animals) every year in the UK, though it is careful to note the problems of estimating cat predation, and to qualify its effect on the bird population (see RSPB, n.d.). Exercising considerably less restraint, *Daily Mail* columnist Dominic Lawson (2016) half-humorously imagines the pet killer to be a ‘songbird liberationist’, noting that cats are as bloodthirsty as any fox: ‘Only a small minority of the victims are killed for food and as anyone who has seen a cat playing with one of its victims must acknowledge, there is a strong element of what appears to be pleasure ... I don't wish to make light of the anguish felt by the owners of Croydon’s cats, but who sheds tears for the songbirds slaughtered daily in our gardens?’ (Lawson, 2016, p. 16). The recognition of cats as expert ‘natural’ hunters does raise the question of how best to regulate their instinctive prowess as predators: domestic cats are ‘predators first and foremost’, even if this evolutionary understanding is only part of the ‘enigma’ of the domestic cat (Bradshaw, 2014, p. xxv; see also Tucker, 2016). We rarely speak of our favourite companions as *predators*, however, let alone the natural born spree-killers that foxes have for many become; we tend to see their predations as at worst the work of incidental rather than ‘illegitimate’ killers. Nor do we seriously countenance any drastic curtailment of their free-roaming rights, at least in the U.K. (Davis, 2016, Marra & Kinsella, 2016). In some parts of the world, where cats were introduced relatively recently and pose a drastic threat to ‘native’ wildlife, cats might reasonably be defined (as they are in New Zealand) as ‘alien predators’, and, ironically, there is now a call, in such conditions, to extend criminological profiling and forensic analysis to cats (see Moseby, Peacock, & Read, 2015). But few in the U.K. seriously call for the confinement of these ‘cuddly killers’ in order to protect native bird life. All the same, the uncomfortable juxtaposition of pet cats as both predators *and* prey (U.S. National Parks Service, n.d.; see also van Patter & Hovorka, 2018)

suggests how peculiarly entangled the discussion of the ‘Croydon cat killer’ inevitably becomes.

Notably, cars have yet to be blamed at all in this whole debate, though they are perhaps the most viable culprit, given their starring role in what has been described as a ‘wildlife holocaust’ (Smith, 1994). As with cats, no-one seriously countenances waging a war on cars, or at least, not for the sake of pet cats and the other creatures of the city. The role of the car in creating the technocultural entity of *roadkill*, product of the friction/frottage of ‘animobility’ and ‘automobility’ (see Michael, 2004), is wholly obscured. Mike Michael’s brilliant analysis of roadkill might be further developed, for if the new animality that roadkill represents has the potential to segue from culture back to nature, the *predation* of roadkill by the likes of foxes adds an unprecedented level of queerness: roadkill-carrion is an accidental by-product of the automobile age, but subsequently-outraged corpses, the severed body parts and eviscerated carcasses of family pets, portends by contrast the monstrosity of urban nature, the fox appearing as a far more sinister a figure than the 4x4.

The wider political/biopolitical issues revolve therefore around how we understand the place of urban animals and the environments they have to navigate. Understanding the political framing of the Croydon cat killer case requires an appreciation of how we have come to see the animals around us and what this means for cohabitating with different forms of animal life. Crucially, this is a matter of the stories we tell or are told about animals as both victims and predators. We might, in conclusion, register the proliferation of these stories, and speculate on the impact these have on the lives of animals in the city.

5. Conclusions: Towards Fabulous Ecologies

Some kinds of animal ‘predation’ are more widely accepted than others, then, not only because of the inevitable anthropocentric bias but also by way of diverse ethico-political commitments concerning our animal neighbours. Cats killing birds might be considered (by most) to be a matter for nature to handle, whilst vehicles killing cats might be considered (by most) to be an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of urban pet keeping, whilst the predation of cats by a human being is (to most) a monstrous deformation of social and natural orders alike, even if it is an unlikely, infrequent, or extreme case of animal cruelty. Instead of dismissing the latter as an instance of moral panic, the intellectual failings of a gullible public, aided by a sensationalist and uncritical news media, we might reflect in conclusion on what the case of the Croydon cat-killer tells us about the normality of animal lives and deaths in the human-dominated environment that cities represent. The ‘cat killings’ furore should be seen as a preeminently political phenomenon, or, better, a biopolitical phenomenon, since we are speaking of a politics of life in which some lives are considered more important than others, some populations more deserving of regulation and intervention, some deaths acceptable and some intolerable (see Asdal, Druglitrø, & Hinchliffe, 2017). This is not to write off the horror of a human killer, if this turns out to be the case, nor to rate the deaths of a whole range of animals in the city as simply inevitable; rather, it is to focus on the present and future politics of the multi-species city, and how we as humans intervene (deliberately or unintentionally) in the lives of the other animals that surround us, or overlap with us, or those that cross our paths sporadically or every day, whether we notice them or not.

Where does our focus on the *stories* we tell about animals in the city leave the nonhuman animals themselves? We have argued that the case for and against a human predator of pets

rests, first of all, on a narrative about human and nonhuman animal nature, about the perversion of human nature on the one hand, as opposed to the question of animals doing what comes naturally on the other, even if their urbanity is novel, and the consequences regrettable. This is a contrast, or perhaps a choice, between the ‘making’ of a human predator and the predatory instincts of a confirmed carnivore. In both cases, we have argued that a logic of predation is at work. In this case, we are concerned with the ‘intrusion’ of commensal animals into what are considered to be ‘human’ spaces, rather than the movement of human beings and their various interests into the ‘wilderness’. This is a controversy that cannot be reduced to animal nature (urban foxes) versus human nature (however perverted): rather, it is a conflict between different logics and optics of predation. We have been at pains here to show that the latter should be considered quite literally, in terms of making things visible, and we have shown through an analysis of the cartographies of terror mobilized by the media and by animal advocacy organizations that the narratives of predation are *enabled*, authorized by representations that link seemingly isolated phenomena and reveal them to be parts of a horrifying whole. Finally, we have tried to show that these logic and optics of predation endorse particular political (or, better, biopolitical) regimes, constructing a particular place for other animals in the city, even if only to produce them as problems.

It is important to emphasize that these stories – of pet victims, human killers, and predatory foxes – are more than just representations, discourses, social constructions. This *is* a moral panic, but rather than take this to mean something like ‘fake news’, it is more instructive to think about the competition between narratives about urban animals (including ourselves). We might think of an urban ecology of stories, a *fabulous ecology* or *fabulous ecologies*, in which stories proliferate and circulate as ways of making sense of the world, attracting sponsors and supporters, coming into conflict with alternative interpretations and interest

groups. But, and it is both obvious and necessary to underline this, these stories about lives and deaths have life and death significance for the various creatures of the city. We take our inspiration here from the pragmatist understanding of language as one of the tools by which we make sense of the world: as Richard Rorty put it, ‘we need to stop thinking of words as representations and to start thinking of them as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment’ (Rorty, 1999, p. xxiii). But whereas conventional pragmatism is, perversely, notably anthropocentric and biologicistic, we want to go much further, thinking about animal others as agencies in a multispecies city lived in the imagination as well as in reality. We see the media as a vital part of the linguistic networks linking the organism to the environment. Narratives like these might be considered structural *affordances* that provide resources for imagining and engaging with other species, with some of these stories lethal or toxic affordances. The relatively relaxed attitude of urbanites to charismatic if potentially dangerous fauna is one reason for a remarkable level of urban biodiversity, as Schilthuizen (2018) reminds us. But one easy way for, say, foxes to forfeit this public tolerance and sympathy would be for them to be widely identified as pet predators. The narrative of foxes-as-killers may generate antipathy and fear towards our vulpine neighbours: it endorses non-lethal removal at best, and at worst violent eradication. Conversely, those who seek to raise the spectre of a crazed human killer of cats exonerate the fox, and salvage his parlous reputation, allowing him to exist beside or amongst us, even as we encroach ever further into the domain of the ‘wild’.

In focusing on the power of *stories*, we do not want to weave in a roundabout way back to the priority of human beings and the purportedly distinctive privileges of the one and only ‘storytelling animal’ (Gottschall, 2013). An emphasis on the role of stories and narratives, logics and optics, does not have to mean a wholesale retreat from the animal. Thom Van

Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose have argued that our approach to the city has to proceed from the premise that other animals help write the metropolis: ‘The city is not so much an objective fact as it is a specific material mode of storying — a way of understanding relating and becoming. It is a story, told and enacted by many creatures’ (van Dooren & Rose, 2012, p. 18). There is an alluring air of romance in Van Dooren and Rose’s vision of birds, bees, rats, pigeons, wildlife, pets and pests alike, all busily engaged in writing their way through the city. We can certainly learn from what other animals are doing: new narratives like these are ways of ordering and making sense of the world, and they offer pointers for how we might live with other species in the cities we share. But if urban animals *confabulate* with us, they do so in a fabulous ecology not of their own making, and they are especially vulnerable to the stories we as humans tell about them. Moreover, life stories do not have always to be affirmative, and predation should also be installed as a fundamental framing for the the *bionarratology* (Herman, 2018) of the city. The multi-species metropolis is a multi-authored narrative of death as well as life, predation as well as neighbourliness, incompatibility and incommensurability as well as commensality.

Acknowledgements

An early version of this paper was first presented by Ilanah Taves at the 2019 AAG annual meeting in Washington, DC. Ilanah would like to thank Sharon Wilcox and Stephanie Rutherford for organizing the session on ‘Multispecies stories of power and vulnerability’, and those who offered their comments. We would also like to thank the three reviewers for their helpful suggestions, and our colleague Maan Barua for his interest in this research on urban animals.

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